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ABSTRACT

This study examined the incidence of violent acts and other types of malicious conduct by students against teachers in selected rural Tennessee public schools. Twenty-seven high school principals (a 77% response rate) completed a questionnaire based on incidents where teachers had been subjected to attacks and violent acts by students over the past three years. The study reports 229 violent acts committed by students. These incidents included 1 murder, 2 armed robberies, 1 reported rape, 129 acts of vandalism, 86 threats against teachers, 1 case of arson, and 9 acts of physical abuse. Most students involved in the acts were from single parent or otherwise "broken" home situations. Legal disposition of these cases resulted in the perpetrators being assigned to probation or being sentenced to a state penal institution for youth or adult offenders. Schools need to address the problem of violence through action plans. An action plan should include the development of meaningful school programs, improved guidance services, better communication within the school, and increased participation between the school and home. Other recommendations include: (1) increased supervision and security; (2) programs designed to meet diverse student needs; (3) student and parent input into school rules and regulations; and (4) policies to manage these critical situations. (KS)

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A Study of Violence and Misconduct Perpetrated Against Teachers by Students in Selected Rural Tennessee Schools

A Research Paper
for the Annual Meeting of
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by

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A Study of Violence and Misconduct Perpetrated Against Teachers by Students in Selected Rural Tennessee Schools

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine certain incidences of violent acts and other types of malicious conduct by students against teachers in selected rural Tennessee public schools.

Perspective

Although schools are considered places of learning and a safe haven for students and adults, disruptive acts by students are a phenomenon of increasing concern. Students from all social strata, economic conditions and educational capacity are found in public school classrooms. Because of the diverse make up of the student population in most schools, disruptions within the school environment and carry-over disturbances from external sources pervade public school campuses. It seems that teachers are routinely battered, harassed and, sometimes, raped or murdered in the public schools or at school related events. Reported assults on school personnel drastically increased during the decade of the 1980's and reports of anti-social behavior of students continue into the 1990's. The problem is of such a magnitude in some localities that the normal operation of school is curtailed. The cost of such acts is costly in personal suffering and loss of property. The National Association of School Security Directors estimate that violent acts in schools cost the American taxpayer

nearly a billion dollars annually. (Bayh, 1978)

It is important that educators study this significant problem so that ways to cope with and reverse this catastrophic set of events can be implemented.

Research Method

A questionnaire was sent to 35 high school principals in certain rural regions of the State of Tennessee. Each principal was instructed to complete the questionnaire based on incidences where school teachers hadbeen subjected to attacks and violent acts by students. The study was limited to situations where the students involved were placed on suspended status or expelled from school. Also, the violence or misconduct occurred on school premises or during school sponsored activities within the past three years. A total of 27 school principals (77%) returned completed questionnaires. Ms. Mena Williams, Research Analyst, compiled the data and assisted in the research project. The data are presented in descriptive form and shown in Table 1.

Description of the Findings

The results of the study show that there were some 229 (unduplicated count) violent acts committed by students toward teachers in the 27 high schools responding to the questionnaires. These incidents included 1 murder, 2 armed robberies, 1 reported rape, 129 acts of vandalism, 86 threats against teachers, 1 case of arson and 9 acts of physical abuse. (See Table 1)

Table 1

Violent Acts	Number of Occurrences
Arson	1
Murder	1
Physical Abuse	9
Rape	1
Robbery	2
Vandalism	129
Verbal and Non-verbal Abuse	86
	229 Total

Most students involved in disruptive acts were from single parent or otherwise "broken" home situations. This is not to generalize that all young people who live in single family circumstances or who have had problems in school will become involved in violent or serious acts of misconduct. Public schools exist to serve the educational needs of all who attend. All students have certain constitutional rights. These rights cannot be impaired without due process. The basic tenents of due process include the right to know alleged charges in writing, the opportunity to prepare a defense, the right to representation by legal counsel, the right to call witnesses and the right to appeal. It should be noted that no student should attempt to exercise a constitutionally protected interest to the deteriment of another person or to cause serious disruptions to the school process. The students involved in this study had been guilty of other delinquent acts. Also, based on the research findings of the National Institute of Education, it has been concluded that violence and vandalism is higher in schools where students do not feel a sense of ownership. (NSRN Case Study Journal, 1981) Legal disposition of these cases resulted in the perpetrators being assigned to probation or being sentenced to a state penal

institution for youth or adult offenders. Legal disposition of these cases resulted in the perpetrators being assigned to probation or being sentenced to a state penal institution for youth or adult offenders.

Student violence toward teachers is a serious issue and must not be tolerated. It is important that school and community leaders respond to this growing dilemma with programs stressing prevention and remediation.

Recommendations

There are no easy answers to the problem of violence in schools, but school leaders must take the responsibility to effectively address this matter. An action plan should include the development of meaningful school programs, improved guidance services, better communication within the school and increased participation between the school and home.

More specific guidelines which should help to decrease violence and make schools safer places to teach and learn include the following:

1. controlled access to school buildings and other facilities
2. proper identification of students and visitors
3. adequate supervision and observation techniques
4. programs designed to meet diverse student needs
5. student and parental input into school rules and regulations
6. regular reporting of misconduct
7. cooperation with law enforcement agencies and positive security planning
8. meaningful school board policies and involvement to manage these critical situations which occur at school or at school related events

9. the availability of counselors and other qualified personnel to respond to student needs.

Violence and social misconduct should be treated as both school and societal problems. Combating these problems requires improved cooperation among the schools, the community and other service agencies. Efforts should be undertaken to enhance relationships among parents, educators and law enforcement officials. These programs should provide alternative treatment and behavior modification. By working together, violence and vandalism can be reduced.

Notes

Bayh, Birch, "Seeking Solutions To School Violence and Vandalism," Phi Delta Kappa, v. 53; n. 5; pp. 299-302; January, 1978.

NSRN Case Study Journal, National School Resource Network, Washington, D.C., 1981, p. 41.